



## Review

*Mosaics in Roman Britain*. By A. Beeson. Amberley Publishing, Stroud, 2022. Pp. 96, illus. Price £15.99. ISBN 9781445689883 (print), 9781445689890 (ebook).

This attractively presented book ranges widely over the subject and contains much within its slim compass. Chapters 1–6 tackle the origins of the medium, laying mosaics, coarse borders, possible sources of images, repairs, and other flooring types in Roman Britain. A chronological approach is adopted for Chapters 7–11, respectively covering mosaics from the first to fifth centuries C.E., while Chapters 12–17 touch on certain popular themes – marine subjects; gardens, symbolic pools and mosaics; some of the myths depicted in Romano-British mosaics; Bellerophon; Orpheus – culminating in a discussion of the extraordinary Boxford mosaic with which the author was extensively involved. The work concludes with a short but useful list of Further Reading.

The somewhat eclectic structure coupled with the lack of an index affects the usefulness of the book as a reference work, but the introduction explains that it is ‘intended as a popular introduction to Romano-British mosaics, their construction, mythology and imagery’ (p. 8). Given the target audience, it would have been preferable to write in more accessible language: even specialists do not normally refer to a sea bull as a *bovicampus* or a sea leopard as a *pardalocampus*, for example, while the multiple appearances of ‘sea denizens’ could have been curbed by firm editing. A glossary would be useful, although some words are defined on their first appearance.

However, one of the charms of the author’s highly individual approach is a refreshing take on some modern preoccupations. ‘Much is made of mistakes in the geometry of mosaics but it is doubtful if, faced with a riot of decoration, the client even noticed or cared that one corner of a large mosaic differed from another’ (p. 19). On dating, ‘much is still guesswork’, and the author offers several pertinent suggestions for ‘the apparent absence of third-century mosaics’ (p. 40) as well as endorsing the possibility of fifth-century floors (p. 55). The British Museum’s decision to display only the central roundel of the Hinton St Mary mosaic is evocatively described as ‘akin to the National Gallery cutting a detail out from a Van Dyke [*sic*] painting in order to save wall space’ (p. 8).

Factual and typographical errors are few, but a note of caution needs to be sounded about the interpretation of figured mosaics. While the book includes some inspired identifications previously made by the author which have been widely accepted, such as Diana at Hadspen (Bratton Seymour) (pp. 18, 47 and fig. on 48) and Orpheus at Wellow (pp. 87–8), other ideas remain controversial, yet there is no hint of this in the text. For instance, another figure found at Hadspen is identified as ‘probably Venus’ (pp. 18, 47, 68) despite being more plausibly interpreted as Bacchus in the site museum and reconstructed as such in the Villa Ventorum at The Newt in Somerset. We learn that busts of the Seasons possibly occupied the corner octagons of the recently excavated Stibbe factory mosaic at Leicester (p. 36), but there is no evidence for this. The interpretation of a figure in the Boxford mosaic merely as ‘a palace guard’ (p. 90, fig. on 96) ignores the views of others, including this reviewer, who consider he is likely to be a second representation of Bellerophon.

An important feature of the book is its wealth of illustrations. Arguably it might have been better to include fewer pictures so that they could be reproduced at a larger scale, but they are a useful complement to the text for those familiar with the mosaics and provide inspiration for readers new to the subject to explore further. Among the highlights are a number of interesting *in situ* photographs: the two figured mosaics at Hadspen (pp. 17, 18, 48); several views from the 1930s and 1950s of mosaics at Verulamium, including one showing a female student in skirt and heels energetically wielding a broom on a tessellated floor (pp. 24, 32–4); the famous Dido and Aeneas mosaic from Low Ham in its *frigidarium* setting (p. 49); and a rare view of Colonel Meates standing on a lacuna in the Lullingstone mosaic (but note that

the feet of his companion from the Ministry of Works are not so carefully placed!) (p. 72). As we might expect, there is good coverage of mosaics with which the author was particularly involved, including those from Newton St Loe (pp. 8, 84, 86), Druce Farm (pp. 16, 30), Coberley (p. 39) and of course Boxford (pp. 73, 89–91, 93, 96).

If a weakness of the book is a refusal to acknowledge and engage with other views, its strengths are the enthusiasm with which the author has approached the subject and his generosity in sharing many images from his personal collection. This volume contains much to enjoy and does justice to a lively, original thinker who is sadly missed.

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